Motivation and procrastination

Do you ever feel like you just can’t get started? You’re not alone. Avoiding tasks and putting things off is a habit, and **you can change it**. Try some of our recommended strategies to get back on track.

Motivation and procrastination can be **difficult to manage on your own**. For individual help, please book an [appointment with an academic skills specialist](#).

You might also enjoy [Dr. Timothy Pychyl’s podcasts](#) on procrastination.

**Start with yourself**

Start by reflecting briefly on your own work habits. Be kind to yourself as you reflect; we are all learning.

When it’s time to work on a task, do you...

- avoid it?
- need pressure to get started?
- feel stressed or guilty?
- feel dissatisfied with your results?
- keep polishing one assignment at the expense of meeting deadlines or completing other projects?

What prompts your procrastination? Perhaps...

- you don’t understand what’s expected
- you have difficulty committing to a topic or decision
- you don’t feel like working or getting started
- the task seems intimidating, unpleasant or boring
- you spend too much time on one project
- you doubt the result is good enough, so you keep working.

Are your barriers related to:

- the specific task?
- your work habits?
- your attitude or mindset?

Now that you may have more insight into your habits, use the other sections in this topic to help yourself improve your motivation.

**Set goals**

Successfully completing even small steps toward a **personally meaningful goal** can be very motivating. It’s easier to spend your time intentionally when you know **what matters** most to you.
What are 2-3 areas of your life that you want to do really well at this year? You can't do everything, so make some choices. Take some time to think about what’s important to you, then work on setting goals. Goals are most effective when they are:

- specific
- realistic (can you achieve this goal with your resources, time, etc.?)
- measurable (how will you know when you’ve achieved this goal?)
- given a timeline
- written down and reviewed as needed.

For example: “I want to further my education” is too vague to assess whether it is realistic or measurable, and it lacks a timeline; but “I want to complete a master’s degree in biology at Queen’s within the next two years,” could meet all the above criteria. **Write down your long-term goals**—things you hope to achieve in a year, or five years—using the criteria above. You might consider goals related to your:

- family and friends
- education
- career
- health
- volunteering
- finances
- other interests.

Review these goals at the beginning or end of a school year to see how far you’ve moved toward achieving them, and if they are still important to you.

Next, **write down shorter-term goals** that support your long-term goals. For example, you might write, “I want to earn at least a B+ on my fourth-year biology research paper due on April 20.”

Review these goals every month or two. Post your goals somewhere visible; remind yourself of them when you’re having trouble **prioritizing** competing demands on your to-do list, or when you lack motivation.

**Set goals that matter to you**

Thinking about what you value in life, and how these values translate into long-term goals, can help you think more clearly about your short-term goals and make better decisions about how to use your time from day to day. Values are core ideas you have about the worth of something, and the judgments you make about what is important in life. Our values influence how we use our time.

For example, in a spare half-hour, someone who values orderliness may spend that time organizing their desk and work files, while someone who values fitness may go for a run. You might like to write down your life values. (If you have trouble identifying them, there are lots of places you can find inspiration: online, in books or blogs, talking with family or friends or a spiritual advisor, etc.)
Afterwards, you might find it helpful to translate some of your values into long-term goals.

**Prepare to change**

**What** about your work habits would you like to change? **Write down** one or two things. Be specific. **Why** do you want to make this change?

- Think about the consequences you’ve faced in the past when you’ve delayed working on a task, or **had low motivation for something**.
- If you continue to procrastinate, what will be the **costs**? If you change, what will be the **rewards**?
- **Write down three reasons to make this change.**

**Ask yourself**, on a scale of 1 to 10:

- How important is it that I change?
- How confident am I that I can change?
- How ready am I to change now?

Write down any **barriers** to change you can think of. As you read through the sections below, note down **resources** or **strategies** that you think will help you reduce these barriers. Keep your notes somewhere visible, such as at your desk or on a sticky note on your laptop.

**Strategies for change**

**When the problem is the task**

Many people put off tasks when they aren’t sure how to proceed. If you find yourself avoiding an unfamiliar task, try these strategies:

- **Clarify the task**, its purpose and deadline.
- **Break big tasks down** into small, specific steps and tackle them one at a time.
- **Ask** your professor, TA or classmates if you have questions.
- **Get help**; try the research librarians, the SASS writing consultants, the math help centre, etc.
- **Use the assignment planner** or **thesis manager** to develop a plan with small steps, dates, and specific resources.

**When the problem is your work habits**

Habits and routines are powerful; adopting ones that remove the “will I or won’t I?” decisions out of your day allows you to be more productive.

- Develop a balanced daily routine that works for you. Build in time for meals, sleep, exercise, work time and relaxation time. Try our **time management** strategies and tools to get organized.
- **Reduce distractions** to improve your focus.
- Try working at the same time of day, at the same location.
• Do challenging tasks when you’re most awake.
• Work with a motivated friend.
• Try the "five more" rule to get started or keep working:
  o commit to five more minutes, pages, sentences, problems, etc.
  o do it and congratulate yourself.
  o make a choice: do five more, or stop.
• If you tend to overwork papers, limit the time or number of edits you allow yourself.
• If you think you work only under pressure, create an artificially short final deadline.
• Set multiple small deadlines for each stage of a project; share these deadlines with an accountability buddy—someone who will hold you to your promises.

When the problem is your mindset

Be aware of your emotions as you approach or avoid a task. Discomfort is a signal. Ask yourself: are you unsure, bored, intimidated?

• If you feel uncomfortable, don’t give in!
• Stay on task, even just for a few minutes at first. Take one, very small, concrete step towards completing the task. Getting started is the hardest part, so keep the first step as small as you need to, so you actually do it.
• Congratulate yourself, and then identify the next very small step. Repeat.
• Practice this approach to staying on task, so you develop the ability to work for longer, despite unpleasant feelings.
• If you have lost interest in your schoolwork, look at your school-life balance. Do you give yourself time to relax and recharge? Make a change and reduce your stress if you need to.
• Examine your standards. Is perfect your goal? Is it realistic? Give yourself permission to do work that is good enough.
• Face challenges with, "I haven't learned this well enough, yet."
• Avoid comparing yourself to others.
• Remember that intelligence is not fixed. Your abilities will strengthen with effort.
• Use the resources available to you; talk with an academic advisor, SASS staff, or a trusted prof.

Developing new habits

• Clearly and specifically define a habit you want to adopt. Start small.
• Link the new habit (ex., taking a walk) with an existing one (making coffee in the morning).
• Start today.
• Have an accountability buddy—someone who will start your new habit with you, or hold you to your promises.
• Keep in mind that it can take a few weeks of daily practice to establish a new habit. Keep trying; it all adds up.
• Be proud of your accomplishments.
• Enjoy the rewards of your efforts (feeling calmer, meeting deadlines, a sense of pride, etc.).
• Stay positive and resilient. Setbacks may happen, but you can persist.
• Accept that discomfort and effort are part of developing a new habit or attitude. Do it anyway; it will get easier over time.
• Remind yourself of your original reasons for wanting to change.

Steps to overcoming procrastination

Avoiding procrastination takes self-regulation and conscious, continuous effort. When we make an intention to act, but then procrastinate, we don’t use the self-control necessary to act as we intended. We tend to procrastinate to avoid unpleasant feelings; we give in to what feels better in the moment. However, giving in like this usually works against our long-term goals.

For example, we might worry that we won’t do well on a complex assignment, so rather than get started on a task we think is challenging, we put it off to (temporarily) avoid those negative feelings of worry and self-doubt. Unfortunately, those negative feelings resurface later and add to the stress we feel about looming deadlines.

The good news is that we can overcome procrastination.

Things to remember:
  • procrastination is a habit, and it takes about 30 days to make a new habit
  • you must make pre-decisions
  • you can do this, even when your motivation isn’t at its strongest.

Follow the steps below to think about what you do now that contributes to your procrastination and make a plan to act differently. Write it down!

Recognize your red flag thoughts

Do you know what you are thinking when you choose to procrastinate? Write down as many thoughts as you can. Common examples:

I work better under pressure / I’ll do it tomorrow / I’ll do it when I’ll feel better / I won’t start because I can’t get everything done now / it’s not that important / Facebook only takes 5 minutes / I need to clean my room / I’m a terrible writer / I’m going to fail anyway so why bother? etc.

Once you recognize what you say to yourself when you choose to procrastinate, you can decide in advance what you will do to change your habitual response to that thought. You can make pre-decisions!
Make a pre-decision
A pre-decision is an “If...I will instead...” statement.
- The “if” part of the statement describes a typical thought or action that flags a choice to procrastinate.
- The “I will instead” statement describes the action you’ll take instead of procrastinating.

When a red-flag thought leads you to procrastinate, you can move immediately to your pre-planned course of action.

For example: IF I say to myself “Facebook takes five minutes” I WILL INSTEAD close my browser or turn off my phone and put it across the room right away.

How does it work for you?
- What are your flags? (If...)
- What will you do when this flag comes up? (I will instead...)

Just get started, but keep the steps small and concrete
Overcoming procrastination is about just getting started. If you think about a whole project, it’s easy to get overwhelmed. It’s much more manageable to take just the first step. You may find you need to “just get started” many times throughout the day, even on the same task. This is common. Procrastination ends when we start.

Keep your first step simple and concrete: write the title page or begin your reference page if you are not ready to write. Jot down three ideas about what you would write if you could. Be kind to yourself! If you’ve gotten started, you are working and you can keep going.

Graduate students
Graduate students have to be motivated and self-regulated, because they work so independently. It helps to have:
- collaborative, respectful relationships with your supervisor and colleagues
- a sense of worth in your project and your academic community
- opportunities to work autonomously
- room to improve your skills and knowledge, and make mistakes, in a safe environment.

Some challenges to motivation in graduate school
Knowledge / skill issues
- unclear expectations (of you generally, or for a particular project)
- not understanding information you’re expected to understand
- not yet feeling or being competent in an area

Structural issues
• length or complexity of a project
• lack of structure
• increased responsibility

**Supervisor relationship issues**
• mismatch in communication or working styles
• difficulty forming a collaborative relationship
• disagreements over priorities and goals
• lack of clarity regarding your responsibilities and independence

**Social/personal issues**
• isolation
• lack of trust in self; fears and worries
• unbalanced work/personal life
• feeling overwhelmed

**Self-regulation issues**
• habitual procrastination
• not managing distractions.

**Connect to your interests**
Positive thoughts and feelings (pride, satisfaction, curiosity, confidence, etc.) can be very motivating in graduate school. You can develop these thoughts and feelings by following your interests.

Ask yourself about your interests:
• What topics or questions did you come to grad school to study?
• What readings or new findings do you find exciting, and why?
• What courses do you find the most interesting, and why?
• What problem in the world would you love to find a solution to?
• If you could design and work on any project, with no limits at all, what would it be?
• What topics or activities do you tend to lose yourself in?

Look for connections between your answers to these questions and your area of research. If you can’t make any connections, consider talking to your supervisor, a mentor, or another trusted person.

**Connect to others**
Sharing ideas, problems and experiences with academic colleagues can support your motivation. Others can help you see the value of your work, share resources, give you constructive feedback, and reduce the sense of isolation so common in graduate school. Now is the time to build a sense of academic community! Try:
• finding a mentor
• joining a social or study group in your field, online or in person
• starting a writing group or thesis support group
• volunteering or working part-time in your discipline
• developing collaborative projects with faculty or postdocs
• setting up weekly meetings with another grad student to discuss and keep track of each other’s progress and increase accountability
• asking another student to occasionally read and edit your work before you send it to your supervisor; offer to do the same for them.

**Improve work-life balance**

It’s hard to feel motivated when you’re tired.

Academic life often fosters a hard-driving approach that prioritizes productivity over well-being. However, this approach has downsides: isolation, low mood, exhaustion, and reduced recreation. Over time, it can lead to “burn out,” stealing your energy, happiness, and health.

Taking time to hang out with friends and family, exercise, or take a nap is time well spent. Freeing your mind to wander sometimes supports creative, original thinking. The work-life habits you develop in graduate school can set you up for long-term success.

If you would like help establishing better work-life balance, see our resources on [stress management](http://sass.queensu.ca), or book an appointment with an [academic skills specialist](http://sass.queensu.ca) or with a [counsellor](http://sass.queensu.ca).